

Road Naming Issues and Proposal

Background

Like most rural counties Mendocino County has slowly but surely increased the number of single homes and subdivisions built and developed in unincorporated areas. For most of this period there was little or no regard for ensuring that access was well defined and incorporated into the public record. This has resulted in many hundreds if not thousands of residences that are located on unnamed roads. These homes have street addresses tied back to the nearest named road which is sometimes miles away and requires several turns on other unnamed roads to reach them. For the Emergency Services Community this can result in extended response times and significant delays in providing service. The potential for confusion and delays during evacuations is apparent.

This problem has been somewhat mitigated with the local knowledge of our first responders. Even local responders are sometimes not fully aware of the anomalies this has created in addressing. In cases where resources are required from outside of the local area, the problem becomes even more significant. In large, fast moving wildland fires the level of confusion this adds to both evacuations and resource deployment can be deadly.

There is considerably greater recognition of this issue today and greater efforts are made to ensure road naming is a component of the subdivision process in the case of major subdivisions. Unfortunately minor subdivisions are handled on a case by case basis and it can still occur that new parcels may be created with access over unnamed roads without also requiring resolution of the unnamed road issue.

There is also no requirement for the naming of unnamed roads when building permits are granted.

Additionally, there are issues with duplicate or confusing road names. Resolution of these issues sometimes requires the renaming of existing named roads.

Current avenues for improvement

The current avenue for the naming of unnamed roads is covered in the Mendocino County Code Sections 18.16.010 through 18.16.080. These sections provide that roads may be named or renamed in one of two ways.

Section 18.16.070 (A) states A **private party** may apply for a "Road Naming Petition" which requires them to pay an application fee of about \$900 with no guarantee the Petition will be granted. They must also acquire the signatures of 75% of the parcel owners affected and submit a map defining the road and all parcels utilizing it for access. After satisfying these requirements the Petition is presented to the Board of Supervisors for their approval. At that time objections from any opponents either written or oral can be made. Unfortunately, there is often vocal opposition from property owners who do not want to change their address and these complaints from voters can be very compelling to our Supervisors. The requirement for getting signatures in favor from 75% of affected property owners is extremely difficult to satisfy in most cases.

This provision can be enacted at the discretion of the County when there are at least “four dwellings or business establishments” located on the proposed road and the road falls within the unincorporated area of the County.

County-initiated Road Naming or Renaming is covered in paragraph (C) of the same section. It states that the County has the right to name or rename all roads within the unincorporated areas of the County without limitations or qualifications. The proposed naming or renaming is submitted to the Board of Supervisors and affected property owners are given the opportunity to object in writing or in person. The Board can then either approve or disapprove the proposal.

In years past I have worked with Building and Planning to achieve the naming of unnamed roads in our district (Anderson Valley) specifically to facilitate emergency response utilizing the County’s authority and without having to satisfy the burdensome requirements for a “Private Road Naming Petition”. Language in an earlier version of the County Code specifically permitted this cooperation between public service emergency response agencies and the County on this matter. Unfortunately this produced a significant amount of blow back to the supervisors resulting in a change in the County Code deleting the authorizing language and specifically giving direction to Building and Planning that the full requirements for the Private Road Naming Petition must be met which effectively ended my success in this arena for Anderson Valley.

Where to go from here

The first and most significant change I am proposing is to add a section to the County Code specifically stating that any public safety agency providing emergency response (Fire and Law Enforcement) would be permitted to request that the County provide for the naming or renaming of a road to facilitate emergency response. The requesting agency would only be required to provide a map showing the location of the proposed road and all parcels utilizing it for access and to install necessary street signage if the new name is approved (as the former code language required). The County would then send notices to affected property owners stating that objections could be made following the same process outlined in the current code and the Board of Supervisors would review the request for a new road name and any objections to it before deciding whether or not to grant the request.

As an interim measure I propose that the Board of Supervisors rescind their earlier direction to Building and Planning requiring property owner approval when a request is made by a public safety agency providing emergency response. This would permit immediate action on the issue and prevent the potential long delay that may be required by the Code modification process. Even if this interim measure is taken, I believe it is still necessary to make a formal code change to make it more difficult to undo this action.

Thirdly, I would request that the Board provide direction to the Building and Planning Department to ensure that all subdivisions resulting in the creation of a new parcel receiving access on an unnamed road also include a requirement for the naming and signage of those roads without additional fees or a petition other than the cost of providing and installing the signs.

Lastly I propose that the section providing for private road naming be changed to reduce the requirement for approval of affected parcels from 75% to 25% and to reduce or remove the permit fee because the naming of unnamed roads is in the interest of public safety.

This proposal has been reviewed and is supported by; The Mendocino County Fire Chiefs Association, The Mendocino County Sheriff's Office, Cal Fire Mendocino Unit and the Mendocino County Association of Fire Districts (letters attached)